



# DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

## news release

OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY

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### INTERIOR DEPARTMENT SEEKS PUBLIC COMMENT ON PROPOSED ANWR LAND EXCHANGES

Susan Recce, Acting Assistant Interior Secretary for Fish and Wildlife and Parks, today invited public comment on a draft Legislative Environmental Impact Statement (LEIS) on proposed Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) land exchanges.

Congress in 1980 directed the Interior Department to assess the petroleum potential and study the wildlife resources of 1.5 million acres of the coastal plain of the 19-million-acre wildlife refuge in northeastern Alaska. In April 1987, Interior Secretary Don Hodel reported to Congress that studies indicated the area may have vast quantities of oil and gas, and that these resources could be explored and developed while protecting the wildlife values of ANWR. Hodel recommended an environmentally sound leasing program for the 1.5 million acres.

While petroleum assessment and wildlife studies were being conducted, the office of the Assistant Secretary for Fish and Wildlife and Parks, acting separately, conducted negotiations with Alaska Native Corporations concerning possible land exchanges that would benefit the national wildlife refuge system and provide Natives an opportunity to share in revenues if the ANWR coastal plain does have significant quantities of producible oil.

From the outset, the Department has made clear that any exchange would be contingent upon congressional authorization of an oil and gas leasing program for ANWR and congressional ratification of exchanges.

The land exchanges would result in the acquisition of 891,000 pristine acres of inholdings in seven Alaska national wildlife refuges. Alaska Native Corporations would trade those lands for limited oil and gas interests in approximately 166,000 acres in the coastal plain of ANWR. To date, Congress has held hearings on the proposed exchanges and the General Accounting Office has released a report that is highly critical of these exchanges.

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"It is clear that while Congress works toward passage of an ANWR bill, the controversy continues with regard to the land exchange proposals," Recce said. "It is obvious that there is a lack of public understanding of either the intent or substance of the proposed exchanges. Publication of this LEIS provides a clear, accurate, and complete record of these exchange proposals for public review and comment."

Publication of the draft LEIS provides for full public review of all details of these exchange proposals. The draft LEIS describes the importance of the habitat that would be acquired and seeks comment on alternative methods of acquisition. Moreover, it details the state-of-the-art environmental protections that would apply to the traded acres in ANWR.

"I continue to believe that this unique opportunity to acquire outstanding national wildlife refuge inholdings in Alaska by exchanging those lands for limited oil and gas interests in the ANWR coastal plain deserves thorough consideration by the public, the Department, and the Congress," Recce said in making the LEIS available for review.

The Department expects to hold public hearings on the draft LEIS in mid-September.

Notice of availability of the draft LEIS is scheduled to be printed in the Federal Register on August 31. Copies of the draft statement will be sent to all persons and organizations who participated in or communicated on the exchange process. A limited number is available from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service regional office in Anchorage. The draft LEIS also will be available for review at each of the FWS regional offices and at the FWS Division of Refuge Management; Department of the Interior, Room 2343; 18th and C Streets N.W.; Washington, D.C. 20240. Comments will be received until October 24, 1988. They should be sent to: Regional Director, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; 1011 Tudor Road; Anchorage, Alaska 99503-6199.

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